Story Map Public Facing Narrative

Introduction

On March 17, 2019, in response to a tank fire at the Intercontinental Terminals Company (ITC), federal, state and local agencies joined ITC in a Unified Command. Multiple agencies and groups supported the response effort.

A Unified Command was critical in this response. This structure allowed response personnel to rapidly adapt to changing conditions, such as additional tanks catching fire, tanks reigniting after initial suppression, changing weather conditions and a dike breach. Resources from all agencies were deployed and redirected as conditions changed, allowing for maximum effectiveness in responding to the fire while ensuring safety of the responders and the nearby community.

What Are We Doing?

EPA has decades of experience responding to man-made and natural disasters, including fires. EPA assisted in this response by bringing equipment and expertise in response management and air and water quality testing and analysis.

Air monitoring was conducted around the tank farm, in adjoining industrial areas, and communities downwind from the facility. EPA used a small plane loaded with sensors (the Airborne Spectral Photometric Environmental Collection Technology (ASPECT) aircraft) to evaluate the smoke plume, a column which rose thousands of feet into the air. The ASPECT aircraft flew several missions a day throughout the response.

EPA also brought in ground-based sampling equipment, including a bus loaded with air sampling and real-time analysis equipment (the Trace Atmospheric Gas Analyzer (TAGA) unit), which traveled through the downwind community in multiple routes on multiple occasions. EPA also brought hand-held air monitoring devices and deployed them to 60 locations in the community. The data gathered in EPA's air monitoring efforts gave local authorities the critical information they needed to ensure public safety, including several shelter-in-place orders.

In response to concerns that fire-fighting foam was impacting local water quality, EPA took water samples from Tucker Bayou and Buffalo Bayou. After analyses of water sampling, the data will be shared with response partners to determine effective strategies for safe operations at the Port of Houston.